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SUBJECT: LAGOS LARGE, PEACEFUL "SAVE NIGERIA" RALLY

REF: ABUJA 37

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) A large and peaceful "Save Nigeria" rally assembled January 21 near the Lagos State governor's complex in Ikeja. Prominent Nigerian human rights activists, religious leaders, and government officials addressed the crowd on the troubling state of Nigerian domestic politics and the "political vacuum" created by the prolonged absence of President Yar'Adua. The rally ended peacefully with singing and dancing by the approximately 3,000 people in attendance (though some crowd estimates were higher). Also noteworthy was a heavy albeit disciplined police presence; it appears that the rally was coordinated closely with the Lagos State government. END SUMMARY.

MESSAGES TO THE MANNERED MASSES

¶2. (SBU) The January 21 "Save Nigeria" rally in Lagos was scheduled to feature prominent leaders/speakers, including Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, civil rights attorney Femi Falana, and Pastor Tunde Bakare. However, Soyinka, who had led a similar rally in Abuja January 12 (reftel), was unable to attend. Instead, organizers read aloud Soyinka's message, which "regretted that the people's fundamental right to choose their leaders had been thwarted with arrogance and disdain." Soyinka declared that Nigerians "now have the choice to cast off that yoke and reclaim their sovereignty."

¶3. (SBU) Pastor Bakare, head of the Latter Rain Church, urged Nigerians to resist any attempt by the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) to create "a political vacuum" in Abuja due to President Yar'Adua's absence. He also called on the Senate to pass a vote of no confidence on Yar'Adua for abandoning his presidential responsibilities and failing to relinquish his duties to Vice President Goodluck Jonathan.

¶4. (SBU) Pastor Bakare went on to criticize "the PDP's unwillingness to submit to the will of the people." He said, "If it is so hard for these elected officials to hand over power within the same party, how can they be sure that they will hand over power to an opposition party if they lose an election?" Bakare concluded by giving a letter to Lagos State Governor Fashola to take to the Governors' Forum on behalf of the civil society community, respectfully requesting a change in GON leadership.

¶5. (SBU) Governor Fashola accepted the note and commended those present for their peaceful manner and lawful

demonstration. Commenting on the current state of Nigerian politics, Fashola observed that "those who exercise public authority should know they are doing it for one purpose -- to serve the people. If for any reason an elected official is unable to do this, he should quit." Fashola ended his remarks by encouraging the crowd "not to give in to political violence."

COMMENT

¶6. (SBU) The peaceful rally of 3,000 or more ended on a positive note, with activists singing and dancing upon dispersal. A large but disciplined police presence certainly helped to maintain order, but the active participation of and coordination with Governor Fashola and his staff was key to keeping the marchers on message and peaceful. Given the strength of the political opposition in the south, it is not surprising that the Lagos march was bigger and more animated than the earlier march in Abuja. END COMMENT.

¶7. (U) ConGen Lagos coordinated this telegram with Embassy Abuja.
BLAIR